



## EDITOR'S NOTE

*This is the full text of a statement made by Ambassador Michael Comay before the U.N. General Assembly's Ad Hoc (Political) Committee on November 26, 1954*

---

*Published by the*

### ISRAEL OFFICE OF INFORMATION

**New York**  
11 East 70th Street

**Chicago**  
936 No. Michigan Ave.

**Washington, D. C.**  
1621 — 22nd Street

**Los Angeles**  
208 West 8th Street

**Montreal, Canada**  
1260 University Street

This material is filed with the Department of Justice where the required registration statement, under 22 U.S.C. 611 et seq., of Israel Office of Information as an agency of the Israel Government is available for inspection. Registration does not imply approval or disapproval of this material by the United States Government. *November, 1954*

## The Future of the Arab Refugees

Year after year, this Committee has sought to discuss the task of UNWRA in a humane and constructive spirit, free from rancour and political controversy. Year after year, to our deep regret, the Arab representatives have exploited this item for propaganda warfare against Israel. My delegation has now asked itself whether it should react at all. The facts about the origins of the problem have repeatedly been placed on record at previous sessions. Many of the attacks are irrelevant to this issue. To repeat these stale and unprofitable debates can only reduce the chances of peace in the Middle East, without helping a single refugee. Prompted by what we believe to be in the interests of Arab-Israel relations, and in the best interests of the refugees themselves, my delegation will therefore refrain from replying in detail to a number of provocative statements made in this Committee and I shall confine myself to a few general observations.

For one thing, Arab speakers are welcome to establish by copious quotation that Jews criticise each other, or that opposition papers in Israel find fault with the Government. That fact need not claim our special notice. Nor do I propose discussing the excerpts from Professor Toynbee which have been read out. In his historical philosophy, there does not appear to be any place for small states. In particular, he seems seriously displeased that the Jewish people should be creating a vigorous young state, despite the fact that he has dismissed us as a "dead relic of a vanished civilization."

It is the Professor's privilege to be a vehement anti-Zionist if he so chooses, but the historical record must be allowed to speak for itself. The cardinal and undisputed feature of that record is that the Palestine Arab leaders announced they would resort to arms, and did so; that the Arab states announced they would invade Palestine, and did so — proudly announcing the fact in a telegram to the President of the Security Council.

Nobody can foresee how a war will alter the lives of persons and nations. This refugee problem, like other refugee problems, is the

bitter fruit of war. Those who started it cannot now cast the blame upon the United Nations, the great powers, Israel and everyone else. But for the Arabs' fateful decision, there would never have been a single refugee. Arab and Jew would have been allowed quietly to work out their common destiny and the world might have been allowed to relax about the relations between the two Semitic peoples. That is what we wanted and that is what we offered. It did not happen. We have little inclination to dwell on the "might-have-been" or to continue an exercise in the apportionment of past blame. Unless I am mistaken, there is even less such inclination among the rest of you, members of the international community, who find yourself saddled with the tragic aftermath of a war which was not your war. I shall therefore proceed without much ado to a sober restatement of my Government's attitude upon the central problem raised by the Director's Report: the problem of the refugees' future.

## **I. THE CONTRIBUTION BY ISRAEL**

Though Israel did not create this problem, it cannot be insensitive to the human tragedy involved. We have done and will do what we can to alleviate it, and I shall refer to a series of practical measures.

### ***A Measure of Reintegration***

I would first of all direct the Committee's attention to the first of the Tables annexed to the Director's Report on page 7. When the Agency was set up, four years ago, it had 48,500 refugees on its relief rolls in Israel territory. By 1952, we had progressively reduced this number, by absorption, to some 20,000. The Israel Government thereupon relieved UNWRA of all further financial or administrative responsibility for the remaining refugees. This meant a large annual saving to the Agency, and enabled it to wind up its operations in Israel, transfer its personnel, and devote the whole of its funds and attention to its work elsewhere. For us this was no facile gesture. As my Government wrote to Mr. Blandford, the former Director of the Agency, on 18 May 1952, it "would throw a substantial additional burden on the Government, particularly as up to half the remaining refugees are social cases who are not expected to become self-supporting and will remain a permanent charge on the community."

The same letter states, "The Government contemplates that there will then cease to exist in Israel a distinct category of Palestinian refugees, with a status which differs from that of other inhabitants of the country." In this way, a part of the problem, concerning nearly 50,000 persons, has been settled by reintegration. This is only a small part of the whole, but it compares favourably with the total of 8,000 refugees taken off the relief rolls by other means. Incidentally, the position of the Israel Arabs, with whom these former refugees have now been merged, is quite unlike the picture of misery which has been painted here. This is not a matter before the United Nations and I do not want to dwell on it, although we take some pride in the rapid progress our Arab community is making.

I would only express regret that a hostile frontier evidently acts as a distorting mirror. I would be happy to have the distinguished delegate of Iraq visit my country as our guest; he would be relieved to see for himself that the Arabs in Israel are first-class citizens, participating fully in our democratic life and already enjoying standards of well-being from which the corresponding classes of Arab society elsewhere are still remote.

While the refugees within our borders were thus being integrated, a measure of repatriation was also taking place. Certain categories of relatives of Arabs living in Israel were permitted to come in, in order to reunite broken families. Also, a large number, who had filtered illegally into the country, were permitted to remain as legal residents. These two processes contributed to the rapid growth of our Arab population, which numbered less than 100,000 in 1948, and is by now over 180,000. For reasons which I shall shortly explain there is little prospect that Israel will be able to take in any more of the refugees now in the Arab countries.

### ***Release of Blocked Accounts***

Next, there is the question of Blocked Accounts. In his opening statement, Mr. Labouisse made a somewhat critical comment on this matter, but I fear he had not been fully informed about its progress. In the first phase of releasing these frozen bank accounts, which is still in progress, nearly two million dollars are being paid out to refugees in Arab countries. Arrangements have since been

concluded to pay out the balance, amounting to over eight and a half million dollars. Any slight delay there might have been was solely due to the Israel Government's wish to obviate the obstructions and difficulties which presented themselves in the first release, by inviting the representatives of the account holders themselves to suggest improvements in the procedure. This they did, with the result that the procedure has been simplified, and the Government has been able to satisfy all their requests about the conditions of the release.

The Committee might take note of this as a case where Israel and the persons directly concerned have reached a satisfactory agreement by sensible negotiation.

On 16 November, the same day that the Director of UNWRA spoke in this Committee, my Government made a public statement in Jerusalem. In view of the various inaccurate stories put before the Committee, I shall take the liberty of reading this statement, and would request that it be fully inserted into the record. It reads:

"On 27 September 1954 the Israel Government announced its intention, which was elaborated on 3 November 1954 to proceed with the release to absentee or refugee owners, of outstanding balances of their accounts with Banks in Israel and of articles held in safe custody and the contents of lockers. The Israel Government has since been considering practical proposals for implementing its decision and is now able to announce the following release procedure:

All account holders already receiving releases at a monthly rate of 50 pounds to 500 pounds maximum will shortly receive letters addressed to them at the address given on their previous application forms, enclosing a simple form of request for release and transfer of the remaining balance. The completed form should be submitted either directly or by the applicant or through any local organisation he may select, to the nearest branch of Barclay's Bank or the Ottoman Bank, or to the London offices of these banks, or through the nearest UNWRA office. Account-holders who have not yet submitted applications, or those whose applications were not eligible under the previous scheme, are required to make application in the above manner on special forms which should be available within two weeks at branches of Barclays and Ottoman Banks and UNWRA offices in neighbouring countries. Application forms will also be available at the London offices of the two banks.

The Israel Government will ensure that applications are dealt with expeditiously and certainly within 14 working days of receipt. All amounts deducted under the 10% compulsory loan, and all amounts transferred to the Custodian from balances of accounts exceeding 500 pounds, will be refunded and included in the final release. The transfer of the amount released will be made in sterling at the rate of one Israeli pound equal to one sterling, in a single payment.

Applicants requiring release of safe custody articles of contents of lockers must complete a special application form. After verification by the Bank and approval by the Israel Government, articles can be released in one of the following ways:

- (a) To the depositor on personal application.
- (b) To his representative on production of an adequate letter of authority.
- (c) By posting the articles either to a Bank nominated by the applicant or to the applicant himself on his written application, subject to compliance with normal customs regulations in force at the time, but not to any currency or exchange control regulations, which will not be applied in respect of any article released by the Custodian.

If in terms of (a) the depositor wishes to make a personal application, the Israel Government is prepared to facilitate this by providing an escort and transportation for depositors and their property. The Israel Government reserves the right to refuse entry to any person at its discretion."

I would merely add that since then the forms have been printed and distributed to the Banks, and we are awaiting the applications, which as the notice says, will be dealt with in at most fourteen days.

### ***The Question of Compensation***

My Government reaffirms its willingness to consider a measure of compensation for abandoned Arab lands. Our original position, a perfectly logical one, I submit, was that this question was one aspect of the larger problem, and could best be dealt with in the context of a general Israel-Arab settlement. Subsequently, because of the humanitarian nature of the refugee problem, my Government announced that it was prepared to enter into discussions on compensation with any appropriate United Nations organ, in advance of any general settlement.

My Government is now giving fresh consideration to ways and means whereby a measure of compensation might be made available, and might be used to help in the process of integration. This is a complex matter, and in order that the Committee should have a realistic picture of it, I must mention the two main difficulties which have to be surmounted.

The first, quite simply, is money — the ability to pay. It will be understood, that such a financial operation does not depend only on us, and with the best will in the world, it would be premature to make specific proposals until we have found means of making the necessary sums available.

Provided the necessary funds become available, we are willing in principle to incur these heavy obligations. But here there arises the second of the two problems to which I have referred. This is the state of economic siege which the surrounding Arab countries maintain against Israel. It takes a number of forms: the severing of all communication ties, the outlawing of all trade relations, the illegal blockade of the Suez Canal, the pressures on third parties to cease dealing with Israel, and so forth. We suffer severe losses from this economic warfare. In six years of this it had directly and indirectly cost the Israel economy an amount which is probably not less than that of the value of abandoned Arab property, estimated by an expert U.N. body at a figure of 100 million pounds. These losses spell a harder life and sharper austerities in the daily lives of our people. Yet it is poor psychology, for tightening our belts only tightens our resolve and spurs us to greater efforts. The Arabs suffer losses too, particularly Jordan, which denies itself access to our Mediterranean ports and our markets. In fact nobody gains from this wasteful situation, except for such emotional satisfaction as it may give to short-sighted political leaders. Among those who suffer most are the refugees, for no compensation scheme could operate in such an abnormal setting of economic warfare. It would not make sense if Israel were to pump large sums of precious foreign currency into the economies of countries which were at that very time doing their best to ruin Israel's economy. In the formal sense the two issues could be separated; in practice, they are organically connected. The host governments must choose which is more im-



portant to them — carrying on a war against Israel in the economic field or making it possible for compensation to be paid. The Committee must surely hope that they will adopt the latter course, thus liberating the economic energies of our region for constructive purposes, and above all for resettlement and compensation of the refugees.

### ***Jordan-Yarmuk Project***

The distinguished delegate of the United States has referred to the negotiations which Mr. Eric Johnston has been carrying on with the Governments concerned, including Israel, about the Jordan-Yarmuk development project. As this scheme holds such a central place in UNWRA's plans, I would put on record my Government's very earnest and positive interest in it. The Israel Prime Minister and Foreign Minister recently referred to it in the course of an interview which appeared in the "U. S. News and World Report" on 17 September last. He stated that the idea was eminently sound, "both for its own sake — that is, for the sake of the water settlement — and as a means of getting the parties to realise that they can only achieve something worth-while if they pull together and not apart. So, from both these standpoints, it is the right approach." Asked about the basic proposals, Mr. Sharett added that "everything depends on the details of the actual plan. That means primarily on the allocation of the waters. If water is going to be used as a political bribe, no agreement will be possible. But if the water will be allocated on the principle of how much water each State actually needs and how much water it can put to beneficial use, that is another thing." Pointing out that our whole future depended on the possibilities of irrigation, Mr. Sharett hoped that Mr. Johnston would hammer out something acceptable to all parties.

These discussions are continuing, and I understand Mr. Johnston will be visiting the area again shortly. Meanwhile the Committee may safely discount the distorted Arab accounts given here about this important mediation effort.

### ***Border Adjustments***

There has been some discussion in the Committee on the passages in the Director's Report dealing with the so-called "economic"

refugees — that is to say, persons who have lost their livelihoods because the demarcation lines between Israel and the Arab States deprive them of access to part of their former farmlands in Israel. It should be remembered that the demarcation lines were determined by negotiation between Israel and the Arab States concerned and incorporated in the Armistice Agreements between them, which were approved by the Security Council.

Where the demarcation line follows the old frontier of Western Palestine, there is no problem of village lands. That is generally the case with the Lebanese and Syrian borders, and in the South with the Egyptian and Jordan borders. But in the central region, a large irregular part of former Palestine territory was occupied by Jordan forces and annexed to Jordan. Between this area and Israel territory the Armistice Agreement created a new border, which unavoidably cut across village lands in a number of cases. Undoubtedly hardship was caused on the local level wherever a village was thus deprived of a portion of the lands which it used to cultivate. On a lesser scale, the same situation exists with regard to the Gaza strip, another Palestinian area which was occupied and is held by Egypt. Here again, a new border has come into existence.

The distinguished delegate of the United Kingdom has asked whether this problem could not to some extent be relieved by local adjustments of the demarcation line. It is not always feasible for an armistice line, which is also an international border, to zigzag back and forth so as to fit around village boundaries. However, my Government has always been willing to explore the possibility of adjustment.

The Armistice Agreements themselves lay down that the line can only be altered by the mutual consent of the signatory governments. From time to time we have attempted to deal with the situation by land exchanges which would overcome some of the anomalies in the frontier. Thus in January 1951 we proposed such an exchange which would have improved the situation in the Qalqiliya area. On 9 May 1952 the Jordan representative informed us that our suggestion was rejected.

On 30 January 1952, negotiations took place for the division of the Latrun no-man's-land. Under this transaction, Israel would

have gained some 20,000 dunams and Jordan 25,000 dunams. An agreement was provisionally worked out in the Mixed Armistice Commission. On 29 May 1952, however, we were informed that Jordan had rejected the agreement.

Again, an arrangement for the exchange of land in the Zeita area, suggested by Israel was worked out as a joint plan in the Mixed Armistice Commission by Israel and Jordan representatives, in the presence of United Nations observers. In November 1952, the Jordanians withdrew their agreement to the suggested exchange.

The Israel Government is ready to reopen negotiations on this matter at any time with the Arab governments concerned, within the context of the Armistice Agreements. Although this subject is outside UNWRA's terms of reference, I have set out the relevant facts because they have a bearing on the question of the "economic refugees."

## II. REPATRIATION OR RESETTLEMENT

In the various ways with which I have dealt, Israel has tried to contribute to a solution of the problem. We hope to contribute in the future by way of compensation. But it is obvious that Israel cannot solve it. For several years past, it has been clear that the basic solution lies in the permanent integration of the refugees amongst their own kin, in the Arab countries. During these years a number of the most responsible delegations of the United Nations have had the realism to state this view, however unpopular it might be in some quarters. During the present debate there have been fresh affirmations of this evident truth, in particular by the distinguished representatives of the Netherlands, the United States, and France. My delegation owes it to the Committee to set out the Israel position on repatriation with complete frankness.

### *Problem of Security*

Many governments are concerned with sensitive problems of internal security, and carefully enquire whether those who wish to cross their borders and settle in their countries might not be a

danger to the State. Is Israel, of all countries in the world, so fortunately placed that it need take no thought for its own safety? The refugees we are discussing have never identified themselves with our State. On the contrary, they left their former homes, at their leaders' behest, in the course of an armed struggle. The express object of that war was to prevent Israel from being established, in accordance with the General Assembly Resolution of 29 November 1947.

The host governments who demand the right of the refugee to return to Israel, refuse even now to concede Israel's right to exist, and make clear that they would destroy it if they could. Their state of mind is unhappily only too clear from their own recent actions and declarations, including statements made in this debate.

Against such a background, is it probable that the refugees would enter our borders in order to become loyal citizens of the State, giving their full allegiance to its government and its laws, willing to defend it against any threat; would they now accept the national objectives of a country which is Jewish by definition, and is dedicated to fulfilling the historic tasks of Zionism? I regret that there is little sign of such a change of sentiment. My distinguished colleagues have had the benefit of hearing a refugee point of view, and it must have struck them how fully Dr. Tannous corroborated what I have just said. The really significant aspect of his statement was the state of mind it revealed. Since he and his fellow refugees evidently believe that Israel is in illegal occupation of the country, that it is enemy number one, that the Arab minority within it is suffering persecution, that this is a hundred years' war — how could we safely throw open our borders to a fresh influx of such people? What is likely is that Israel, beleaguered as it is by hostile neighbours, would also be fatally disrupted from within.

A larger State could perhaps minimize the risk, by settling elements of dubious loyalty well within its interior, where contact with unfriendly neighbours might be difficult. Unfortunately Israel has not been endowed with an interior. Our State is 70 miles across at its widest part, ten miles at its narrowest. The whole country is a border strip, with frontiers that from their length and physical nature cannot be sealed off. What this lack of depth means

for our security has been only too plain to us, in our efforts to curb infiltration and marauding. Were there to be repatriation, our internal security problem would become insoluble, and our country indefensible.

### ***A Sovereign Right***

Israel is deeply concerned with retaining the good-will of the world — particularly of those countries which have sympathized with the need of our ancient and sorely tried people to have a home of its own once more. That is why, when the United Nations is faced with this painful problem, we wish to gain your understanding for what has been called our “negative attitude” on repatriation. It is not a question for us of the semantics of resolutions or the tactics of debates. The question is whether any Government and any State can be required to do things inconsistent with its own survival. Here I should like to say a word on our right of decision to admit or not to admit people from neighbouring territories. We have listened with deep interest to the views of other governments on this matter. But the determination whether the admission of any person or group of persons to our territory is or is not conducive to the national security or welfare is a sovereign right of the Government of Israel, just as all other countries possess and do not hesitate to apply a similar sovereign right. I am grateful to those of my colleagues who have shown understanding of this problem.

### ***Economic Aspect***

Reluctance to create a trojan horse in Israel is a decisive obstacle to repatriation, but not the only one. From the economic point of view it is a mistake to think of repatriation as simply allowing refugees to trek back across the border, and pick up the threads of their former lives in their former homes. One can understand the tendency of all uprooted persons to live in the past. That is a human and a natural feeling which merits our compassion. But the world they once knew has vanished. Their businesses and jobs disappeared during the Arab exodus. The derelict villages have crumbled away; the abandoned lands have been resettled. The repatriates would be, in effect, new immigrants, to be settled afresh in a country which

has been rapidly transformed, and bears little resemblance to the territory they once left. In the economic sense, therefore, repatriation is a misleading term. In practice it would not be an alternative to resettlement, but a more difficult and more costly resettlement than elsewhere.

### ***Exchange of Minorities***

There is a further aspect we must examine. Would repatriation, even a partial repatriation, pave the way to peace between Israel and the Arab States? In the face of every discouragement, we continue to believe that such peace will come — that Israel and its neighbours will live and work together as good neighbours should, for the benefit of our region as a whole. But we are convinced that nothing could be more calculated to bedevil Israel-Arab relations for all time, than creating in Israel a large Arab irredenta, having the deepest ties with its co-national States which surround us. The world is only too familiar with the impact of such minority problems on relations between States. Nearly 20 years ago, when a British Royal Commission first proposed the partition of Palestine, it also suggested an exchange of minorities, for the sake of harmony. This is in fact what has happened, through the rough surgery of a war which was none of our seeking. The bulk of the Palestine Arabs are in the Arab lands; the bulk of the Jews from those lands have been resettled in Israel. This two-way movement has created a factual situation which cannot be rubbed out, but on which a better future could be built.

### ***The 1948 Resolution***

The General Assembly Resolution of 1948, which spoke of a right to return was adopted only a few months after the end of the Mandate, at a time when the fighting was not yet over. Even at that time, when the realities of the problem were less plain than they are now, the Assembly qualified its recommendation with reference to two criteria: peace and practicability. The views I have expressed today do not offend against the original resolution. The two stipulated conditions for return do not exist, and it is not helpful to the refugees themselves to keep the idea alive in their minds.

## **Lessons From Other Areas**

It may be instructive to glance at the experience of other areas. The political changes which took place in the immediate post-war period, including no less than five partitions, produced a number of large-scale refugee movements. I would refer, for instance, to the 13 million refugees in West and East Germany, the 15 million in India and Pakistan; the 400,000 Karelians in Finland; the 350,000 Volksdeutsche in Austria; the 2½ millions who moved from North to South Korea and an unknown number in Indo-China. The circumstances may have differed in each of these problems, but they have certain striking features in common, to which I would draw the Committee's attention:

*Firstly*, in no case was repatriation the answer to the problem;

*Secondly*, in each case the problem was solved because there was a co-national or co-religious host country which was willing to solve it;

*Thirdly*, international organisations or private charitable bodies could assist a willing host country, but could not be a substitute for one.

### **Jewish Experience**

These conclusions are also borne out by Jewish experience since Hitler came to power. I do not need to recall the pre-war problem of finding new homes for Nazi victims. There was no Jewish State, but there was a community in Mandatory Palestine which had the international status of a Jewish National Home, and which was eager to take in as many as possible of its persecuted brethren. As a result, nearly 200,000 found a new life there — a large slice of the total problem. After the war, the world once more faced the pitiful challenge of the Jewish D.P.s' in European camps, and the Jewish communities which faced persecution in a number of countries. The problem seemed insoluble until the birth of Israel. Jewish homelessness was no longer an international concern, because now there was a national State prepared to take the problem on to itself.

## **Challenge to Arab Statesmanship**

The only solvent for mass refugee problems in our time has been through the refugees being able to invoke the family sentiment of kindred host countries. That lesson has a bearing on the present case too. The problem presents a major challenge to Arab statesmanship — which is whether it has the capacity to make a home for these refugees who live amongst their own relatives. Nobody would wish to minimize the size of the task, its real difficulties, or the time it will take. The Director has referred to some of these factors in his able Report. One special difficulty is that the great bulk of the refugees have remained concentrated around the armistice lines, whereas the most promising resettlement areas are farther afield in the Arab hinterland.

But the elements of a solution do exist. I was surprised at the talk we have heard about “foreigners.” The Arab peoples insist that they are a single people, and that no Arab is a foreigner in any of their countries. Surely this makes it feasible to resettle the refugees among forty million of their kin in eight sovereign States — with unexploited land and water in some — with huge oil revenues in some, and with international funds and assistance available in generous measure. The ultimate factor is not physical resources, but the will to do so, and the courage to say to their own people and the refugees that it must be done.

---

The present discussion has revealed very mixed feelings. Our admiration for the splendid work done by the Director and the Agency in feeding the refugees and providing them with essential services, is tempered with dismay at the lack of progress towards a solution, after six years of international effort. The United Nations and the contributing governments are now being asked to carry the burden for five more years. We can but hope that during that time the problem will be substantially settled. That will only happen if it is lifted out of the political and emotional bog in which it is now so unhappily embedded, and if it is clearly and frankly examined. I have tried to put the Israel Government's views before the Committee in that spirit.